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Reagan's View of Carter Hasn't Changed

Animosity between successive occupants of the Oval Office is a fairly common feature of Washington life. The hostility between President Reagan and former president Jimmy Carter may be more acerbic than most because of the deep differences in political philosophy that divide the two men.

Occasionally, the barely submerged antipathy bobs to the surface—usually when Reagan charges that Carter had failed to do something during his term and Carter denies the charge. There was great bristling in October 1983, for example, when Reagan blamed the suicide bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut on Carter policies that Reagan claimed had weakened the Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence-gathering agencies.

In typewritten notes given to us by Carter's office recently, the former president indignantly recalled that "President Reagan attempted to blame the tragic loss of more than 200 U.S. Marines in Lebanon on Presidents Nixon, Ford and me, claiming that we had weakened the intelligence agencies so badly that he could not obtain adequate information."

Carter added in his notes: "When I made a public statement denying the truth of this allegation, he called me to say that his explanation had been misinterpreted by the press. I replied that I had observed his statement on television and had not relied on press interpretations."

Carter continued: "I asked him to check the Pentagon records and he would ascertain the error of his frequent statement that only he had increased defense spending. He admitted his

mistake and promised not to make it again. However, he has continued to make this claim, obviously knowing that it is not true."

In fact, Reagan criticized Carter's defense decisions as recently as February in a television speech—and again drew a protest from Carter.

With this background in mind, we asked the president recently if he had softened any of his opinions on his predecessor. The short answer is that he has not.

Reagan's normally pleasant face hardened noticeably when we asked, remembering his harsh criticism of Carter in the 1980 campaign: "Has there been an evolution in your thinking about him as you've faced . . . some of the same problems?"

Reagan prefaced his reply by explaining why he had not criticized Carter on some national security issues and other sensitive areas: "I have said that there are some things that you have to realize only the president knows. He's the only one that has all the information on something. Therefore, you can't criticize him on those things unless and until you know what that information is."

One reason he said he wasn't surprised by the burdens of the presidency—and thus more sympathetic to Carter—was that there isn't such a vast difference between his jobs as governor of California and as president: "Over the years we've forgotten that once upon a time the ranks of the governors were where you found presidents."

Bringing him back to his views toward Carter since 1980, we asked: "So there hasn't necessarily been an evolution in your thinking?"

"No," the president replied.